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CHINESE MUSLIMS IN INDONESIA: POLITICS, ECONOMY, FAITH AND EXPEDIENCY

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Introduction

When talking about ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia the main focus is generally on their business acumen or questions of integration versus assimilation. This paper explores another aspect which has wide ramifications for what it means to be ethnic Chinese in the region, namely Chinese Muslims in especially Indonesia. Here by far the most ethnic Chinese adhere to traditional Chinese religions or to a variety of Christian denominations, especially Protestant ones. There have, however, since pre-colonial time existed several communities of Chinese Muslims throughout the coastal regions of Peninsular Malaysia and in the Indonesian archipelago. Prior to European colonialism these communities were well integrated into the indigenous local cultures but things changed gradually during the colonial era and dramatically during the post-colonial period. From constituting well assimilated and functioning groups amongst the local cultures and societies the Chinese Muslims became over time more isolated from the non-Muslim Chinese communities and indigenous cultures alike. This paper argues that this isolation or perhaps more correctly defined minorization process gained momentum during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries due to changes of international trade routes, a re-sinification of the overall Chinese community, and a shift in the way Islam was practiced in the region.

The paper furthermore argues that this minorization process was not confined to the Chinese Muslims but all Chinese communities regardless of religious affiliation. This initiated a process of stigmatization of this particular ethnic group throughout Southeast Asia thereby making them vulnerable towards social and political changes, which were taking place in the different host communities. The scapegoating of the Chinese communities in the Dutch East Indies and during post-colonial Indonesian political history is a case in point.

As one of the peculiar twists of history during the 1960s the otherwise tiny and marginalized Chinese Muslim communities were suddenly propelled into the political limelight in Indonesia, as they were seen by Suharto's New Order regime as proof of the success of its assimilation policies. This further marginalized the Chinese Muslims from the non-Muslim Chinese communities, as the latter were and still are suspicious of the former thus cutting off more or less social ties with them.

That we are really talking about a minority's minority can be seen by the fact that the total Chinese Muslim population in 1983 only constituted about 0.5 per cent of the Chinese population in Indonesia.[1] Today (2003) the total Chinese population in Indonesia constitutes about 3.5 per cent of a total population of about 220 million, so it is legitimate to assume that the Chinese Muslims still constitute a tiny minority of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia.

In order to be able to answer questions like who among the Chinese becomes Muslims, why they convert, how the conversion affects their relationships to other Chinese, and how indigenous Muslims in Indonesian and Malaysia react towards the Chinese converts, it is imperative to provide an overall analytical framework which defines the societal positioning of not only the Chinese Muslims but also the Chinese community in general. To begin establishing such a framework the paper opens by outlining a historical record of the relationship between pre-colonial Chinese traders and Islam in Southeast Asia. It goes on to discuss changes within Islam itself that lead towards a process of minorization of the Chinese communities in the region. It then gives an account of the establishment of the Chinese community in especially Indonesia, and finally discusses the contemporary relationship between Christian and Muslim Chinese in Indonesia and to a certain extend in Malaysia together with how the *pribumi* and *bumiputra* populations in the two countries respectively react toward the Chinese Muslims in particular.

Chinese Traders and Islam in pre- and Colonial Southeast Asia

Drawing on Denis Lombard's studies of Muslim minorities in China and of Chinese minorities in Southeast Asia together with his studies of pre-colonial Chinese maritime trade routes, Ann Stoler direct attention towards the initial entry of Islam into Asia and its expansion throughout the Malay and Indies archipelagos. She argues that contrary to the general notion that Islam expanded into the Southeast Asian region via the Middle East, Lombard traces a different trajectory through China and in particular through the Chinese trading communities in the ninth and tenth centuries, which were already identified as being Islamic (Stoler 2001: 165).

Lombard further elaborates that in the port city of Quanzhou in Fujian Province in Mainland China several mosques and tombstones with Arabic and Persian inscriptions, dating back to the thirteenth and fourteenth century, can be found thus underlining the influence of Islam in that region.[2] He argues that these finds are of equal importance for Southeast Asia, as it was during these two centuries that the important maritime routes running from the south-eastern part of East Asia towards the south-eastern parts of Southeast Asia – the one that leaves from Fujian Province for Luzon and the Sulu archipelago in the Philippines continuing southwards towards the Maluku islands – began bit by bit to be established thus complementing other trade routes that followed the western coasts of Southeast Asia generally known as 'the route of the Champa' (Lombard 2001: 159-60).[3]

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[1] It has not been possible to get more updated information of the proportion of Chinese Muslims in relation to non-Muslim Chinese in Indonesia. As a comparison in neighboring Malaysia the 1991 population census showed that there were 17,117 Chinese Muslims, which constituted 0.4 per cent of the total Chinese population of 4.6 million (Tan 2000: 308).

[2] For further details on Quanzhou and trade routes, see Chen and Lombard (2000: 19–23).

Stoler notes that Lombard's studies of the early trade routes have shown that a relationship between Islamized Chinese communities and commerce is evident in the Southeast Asian region. For example, he maintained that overseas Chinese communities on Java in the thirteenth century were already described in multiple sources as Islamic. Lombard thus makes a strong case in that these two seemingly disparate communities – the Islamized Chinese in China and the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia – when viewed in the *longue durée*, not only have parallel histories but interrelated ones, as both took shape in a similar process that combined the intensification of trade together with an Islamization of the communities in especially Malaysia and Indonesia (Stoler 2001: 165–6).

The form of Islam that the early Chinese emigrants broad along from China constituted an older form of Islam that contained many Indian and Persian elements along with a strong mystical orientation alluded to as *Sufism*. It was brought to the region and Indonesia in particular by religious specialists from Gujerat and other parts of India as well as via the Chinese traders and travellers during the period (The Siauw Giap 1993: 63–6).

Supporting this argument Yahya Wijaya writes that the first encounter between the ethnic Chinese and Islam took place before the establishment of Islam in Indonesia. Furthermore, he maintains that the earliest documentation of the presence of Islam in Indonesia was written by Ma Huan, the secretary of Cheng Ho, a famous Chinese admiral who visited the Indonesian archipelago in the fifteenth century. Ma Huan not only cites archaeological evidences, but also a significant number of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia who practiced Islamic tradition, including fasting and Muslim diet. Wijaya maintains that ethnic Chinese Muslims were among those who initially spread Islam to the local communities in the coastal areas. Some of them even became leaders of the Islamic states established there yeas later (Wijaya 2002: 70).

Anthony Reid discusses how much Islam actually penetrated the indigenous communities during that time. He cites findings of Islamic tombstones, coins, chronicles of later date, and reports of foreign visitors as demonstrating that there was a substantial group of Muslims speaking Malay or Javanese in the port cities on the major trade routes (Reid 1993: 155). He does not explicitly mention whether the Chinese constituted a part of this group although such a proposition is highly likely due to their dominant position as traders.

Reid continues that in Java around 1500 there was constant warfare between these Muslim beachheads and the remaining Hindu states in the interior. Elsewhere there appears to have been a complex interplay between Muslim ports and animist hinterlands. Rulers often played a mediating role, patronizing the mosque of the city traders, abandoning pork, adopting a Muslim name and dress, but did not renounce the supernatural attributes that gave them power over their interior peoples (Reid 1993: 155).

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[3] For more details on the eastern trade routes, see Ptak (1992: 25–49).

There has been a considerably discussion of how deep-rooted Islam was in this period. Reid cites Christian sources which point out that Islam was a minority affair in Maluku and other parts of today's eastern Indonesia in general, and that even that minority were more Muslims in name than in practice. These statements are backed by Arab visitors of this period. Reid cites the Patani chronicle, one of the few Malay sources that described the Islamization process during this period. This chronicle maintains that the first Muslim ruler gave up eating pork and worshiping idols but apart from that he did not change his ways. The same could be said of people in general. They too gave up eating pork and worshiping idols but did not abandon making offering to trees, stones, and spirits (Reid 1993: 155–6).

This 'soft' form of Islam gradually began to give way to a more orthodox form from the middle of the seventeenth century. What initiated this change? Reid states that in the second half of the sixteenth century the boundaries of what he called *Dar al-Islam* or the 'House of Islam' began to be much more sharply drawn. The established Islamic states, notably Aceh, Johor, Patani, Banten, Demak-Pajang-Mataram, and Ternate, extended their authority to their rural hinterlands, demanding at least minimal conformity to Islamic teaching. In their conflicts with neighbouring kingdoms the concept of *jihad* became more prominent as Islam began to assume a major role in their self-perception (Reid 1993: 157).

Reid identifies the underlying forces behind this change of nature in Southeast Asian Islam during the period 1550 to 1650 as being a consequence of a redirecting of trade routes and an intensification of commercial activities due to a more intense and direct contact with the Middle East than at any time before the nineteenth century. For example, from the 1530s Muslim traders based in Aceh began sending their own ships to the Red Sea by way of India, and by the 1550s they were sailing directly to Arabia thus providing, for example, Aceh with a direct contact with Hejaz in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Egypt.

This shift of trade routes did also have as a consequence that the Malay world became directly accessible from Arabia. For example, in the 1570s and 1580s Arab scholars such as Muhammad Azhari and Syeikh Abu'l-Kheir ibn Syeikh ibn Hajar of Mecca and Syeich Muhammad of Yemen journeyed to Aceh and made it their temporary home, preaching, teaching, and disputing with one another. Reid furthermore cites Portuguese and Spanish sources that referred to a large number of Arabian and Persian 'false prophets' helping to strengthen Islam in the archipelago in the second half of the sixteenth century. It was not, however, only Arabs who journeyed to Aceh and beyond but also Southeast Asians who boarded the trade ships on their way to Mecca and Medina for pilgrimage or study (Reid 1993: 61–3).

In relation to the ethnic Chinese Islam in the seventeenth century still attracted many Chinese who lived in the commercial centers along the north coast of Java. According to The Siauw Giap conversion to Islam was a way for the ethnic Chinese to assimilate themselves into Javanese society, since the converted people were usually those who had married locals and adopted Javanese names so as to be able to move upwards the social and political ladder (The Siauw Giap 1993: 61–2).

However, as Islam changed from a liberal religion towards a more orthodox one the number of ethnic Chinese who converted to Islam dropped sharply in the nineteenth century and afterwards. According to Yahya Wijaya, a more orthodox stream of Islam, which began in the 1820s, took a non-compromising approach towards the ethnic Chinese who had not converted to Islam. For example, one of most radical forms of this was an order issued by Prince Diponegoro, a prominent Islamic leader in Central Java, to kill the ethnic Chinese in his territory who refused to convert to Islam and to require an immediate circumcision for those who agreed to become Muslims. Another example of the radicalization of Islam was a prohibition of intermarriage between Muslim women and non-Muslim men. This was a radical break with past practices within the Muslim communities to which the ethnic Chinese belonged. Conversion thus became a precondition rather than a voluntary action (Wijaya 2002: 71).

A consequence of these developments was the creation of a new relationship between Chinese and Muslim communities: a process of minorization of the ethnic Chinese gained momentum as the radicalization of Islam spread throughout the Southeast Asian archipelago. Lombard, in acknowledging this development, mentions that the previous early history of fluid movements of population, read the ethnic Chinese trade communities, not yet identified as ‘minorities’ contrasts sharply with the discrete and bounded social unities they have become since then. Reinforcing this development was a ‘re-sinification’ of the Chinese communities. That was triggered by waves of female immigration which reintroduced classical Chinese virtues into the individual households. This development was additionally supported by political changes in China toward the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) and especially after 1911, where the Chinese authorities attempted to draw emigrant communities to their cause in order to obtain financial assistance from them. These developments meant that only a small number of the Chinese, a minority of a minority, as Lombard calls it, still located themselves: ‘in relation to the great current of “conversion” that carried them along and advocate the systematic and definitive Islamization of the entire surrounding community’ (Lombard 2001: 161, notes 37 and 38).

This minorization process was furthermore reinforced by Dutch colonial law that separated the ethnic Chinese from the indigenous Indonesian communities by characterizing them as being a different kind of citizens. This special status gave the ethnic Chinese the impression that the social status of the indigenous Indonesian was inferior to that of the ethnic Chinese and other ‘foreign

Orientals'. Since Islam was commonly associated with the indigenous Indonesian many ethnic Chinese considered that converting to Islam would downgrade their social status (The Siauw Giap 1993: 68).

Before going further into this discussion a short summery is provided. So far the paper has sought to excavate the background for why only a tiny number of contemporary ethnic Chinese converts to Islam. The main focus has been on the historical conditioned transformation of Islam in the Southeast Asian region. From being a flexible, co-optive, and tolerant religion that acted as a facilitator between different cultures and peoples it changed towards a more orthodox religion that excluded the very same people it previously encompassed. The main reason for this process of exclusion has been attributed to a change in trade routes and new direct links between Southeast Asian and Arabic cultures in the eastern-south-eastern end of the Middle East during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These new links functioned as international routers for new streams of Islam, a more exclusive form so to speak, that hardened the boundaries between people and cultures in a religious sense. These developments had tremendously effects on the Chinese communities: form being part of a flowing exchange of different peoples to a status as minorities among suspicious majorities, and from being Muslims themselves they more or less voluntarily turned away from Islam towards Christianity, the religion of the new rulers in the region, the Dutch and British colonialists.

Before going into detail with the relationship between contemporary Chinese Muslims and ethnic Chinese in general together with how the indigenous Muslim community in Indonesia and to a certain extend in Malaysia, relates to the Chinese Muslims, a short historical overview of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia is imperative. First, it sheds light on the precarious situation that the current ethnic Chinese regardless of religious affiliation find themselves in, and second, it provides us with a background for examine the validity of the following statement given by Junus Jahja, one of the prominent leaders of *Persatuan Islam Tionghoa Indonesia* or 'The Indonesian Chinese Muslim Union' formed in 1963:

> …by embracing Islam young ethnic Chinese experienced that immediately they are fully accepted as fellow-Muslims and compatriots by the people at large who are 90 per cent Muslims. All kinds of hostility and controversy as an inheritance of the past disappear. They are heartily welcomed now and totally integrated within the community. So they have at last a permanent 'place in the sun'. This is exactly what ethnic Chinese are so looking and longing for (Suryadinata 1979: 170).

Being Chinese in Indonesia: A Diachronic Perspective

Most of the Indonesian ethnic Chinese originates from Fujian, Guangdong, and Hainan provinces in southeast China and can be classified into five main language groups: Hokkien, Teochius, Cantonese, and Hainanese. Speakers of the fifth main language group, Hakka, are scattered throughout southern and southeastern China originating from the provinces of Guangdong, Fujian, Jiangxi, Sichuan, Hunan, Guangxi, Yunnan, and Hainan. Some have also ancestral links to Taiwan. The Hakka people are the sojourners and migrants *par excellence*.

Traders from these areas have traveled as discussed above to and from the Southeast Asian region for several centuries before the arrival of the Europeans setting up trade links to present day Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines.[4] It was only during the period of Dutch East Indies that many Chinese were brought to Indonesia in a more systematic manner. Most of them ended up as indentured labours in the plantations and tin mines in West Kalimantan and Bangka Island and those who concentrated on business and trade were to a great extend confined to cities and towns as they were generally not allowed to own land. The latter resulted in the setup of complex trade infrastructures as this was the only avenue available to them for obtaining a livelihood.[5] The ethnic Chinese were furthermore recruited by the Dutch to serve as middlemen between the colonial authorities and the local population. The colonial policy of non-integration and non-assimilation in relation to the Indonesian communities thus reinforced the processes of minorization as previously described. These developments have had grave implications for the ethnic Chinese ever since, as they have frequently been accused by the *pribumis* for sitting heavily on trade and finance thus making it difficult for them to move into these sectors.[6] For these historical conditioned reasons the ethnic Chinese have been made scapegoats whenever social and political crises have arisen in Indonesia.

When taking a closer look at the Indonesian Chinese community it turns out to be quite a heterogeneous group. Two main groups' stands out: the first one is the *Peranakan* and the other one the *Totok*. *Peranakans* was formerly known as *Baba* or early immigrants to the region. *Babas* used their local position to claim higher status compared to the *Sinkeh*, the newly arrived Chinese immigrants (Tan 1997: 25–6). A derogative usage of the term *Baba* occurs when coupling it with the term *Ali*. *Ali-Baba* refers to a joint Indonesian-Chinese business venture or more specifically to an Indonesian front figure in an enterprise owned and financed by an ethnic Chinese.

According to William Skinner (1996: 78–9) *Peranakan* furthermore refers to ethnic Chinese who had developed a creolized or mestizo culture with strong Indonesian characteristics. These Chinese are descendants from the original immigrants to Indonesia, traders or indented labours imported by the Dutch during the early colonial period. The most important characteristics of the *Peranakans* were and still are that they marry local Indonesian women and speak *Bahasa Indonesia* within the family. Proficiency in Chinese languages and knowledge of traditional Chinese culture has gradually disappeared. Today most *Peranakans* do not speak, read or write Chinese.

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[4] For a general overview see Reid (1996) and Suryadinata (1997).

[5] For details on Chinese settlements in rural Southeast Asia see Heidhues (1996: 164–82).

[6] For more information on the role of the Chinese in the Indonesian economy, see Wibisono (1995:87–99).

The other main group of Indonesian ethnic Chinese is the *Totok*. This term refers to a ‘full-blooded’ Chinese in Indonesia. They are recent immigrants or children of recent immigrants, who speak one or two Chinese languages and practice traditional Chinese customs within the family (Skinner 1996: 86, 88–92). They were originally contract labours during the 1920s and 1930s where the immigration rate was at an average of 4.3 per cent annually. This immigration rate declined rather sharply after the Second World War and came to a complete standstill in the early 1950s, where the Indonesian authorities did not allow further Chinese immigration. The *Totoks* generally represent Hokkien, Cantonese, and Hakka speaking areas in southeast China. They practice speech-group identification as an important means for identifying group membership. Because of laws implemented by the Indonesian government in 1959 and onwards forbidding non-Indonesian people to engage in retail trade outside towns many *Totoks* moved from the Outer Islands to the commercial centers, especially around Jakarta and the other main cities in Indonesia, where some of their most important markets were. Modern Indonesian Chinese business culture is generally dominated by *Totoks*.

The Indonesian authorities and the society in general have always been ambivalent towards the ethnic Chinese. It seems as if there exists a certain inclination towards anti-Chinese riots right down through the Indonesian social and political history. Such a view can be substantiated when comparing negative social, economic, and political development in the country and the appearance of anti-Chinese riots. A main precondition for this correlation is that the Chinese is generally conceived of as a foreign minority and are thus classified as non-*Pribumi*. Furthermore, international political developments have also helped fuelling anti-ethnic Chinese resentments within the Indonesian community thus reinforcing the before mentioned grievances towards the ethnic Chinese.

For example, in the early 1950s the newly established communist government in China opened an embassy in Jakarta’s China town, which was followed-up by a number of consulates in other major cities throughout Indonesia. The diplomats were very active in contacting the ethnic Chinese. This resulted in a second round of re-sinifying the Chinese communities in terms of an increasing flow of Chinese literature, the opening of many Chinese language schools, and a resurrection of Chinese religions together with the building of temples throughout the country. The main aim of these activities was to re-establish the ethnic Chinese as an ethnic group that were to exist on an equal footing with the other ethnic groups in Indonesia. It was thus a process of integration and not one of assimilation.

These developments brought the Chinese communities into the limelight and questions of political loyalty and national belonging became a hotly debated topic. According to Mely Tan (1997), of the 2.45 million ethnic Chinese believed to live in Indonesia during the 1950s, about one million could be considered having dual nationality; that is, having citizenship in both China and Indonesia. In order to correct this, the Indonesian government decided to force the ethnic Chinese to make a choice between citizenship in one or the other country. This resulted in the Sino-Indonesian Treaty on Dual Nationality, signed in Bandung on 22 April 1955. Here it was decided that the ethnic Chinese had to choose which nationality they preferred during the period January 1960 to January 1962. Most of the about one million ethnic Chinese with dual nationality registered and out of those about 65 per cent opted for Indonesian citizenship. In practice this meant a huge exodus of ethnic Chinese, about 400,000 people, from Indonesia, heading towards the new Chinese nation (Tan 1997: 33–5).

The plight of the ethnic Chinese had, however, only begun. In 1957 the authorities demanded that all Indonesian citizens attended Indonesian schools. This meant that thousands of Chinese schools were closed. The period around 1965–6 was a particular difficult one as many Chinese were killed and driven out of, for example, Aceh, North Sumatra, and the rural areas in west Kalimantan. The main reason was that especially the political elite and the military thought the ethnic Chinese were collaborating with the Indonesian communist party (PKI) and that the first president Sukarno was relying too heavily of the Chinese and PKI for political support.

This situation further changed when President Suharto's New Order regime (1966–98) replaced what was left of Sukarno's Guided Democracy in 1965. The new regime initiated an intense programme of assimilating the ethnic Chinese into the Indonesian community by forbidding Chinese names, signs in Chinese characters in public places, publications, cultural and religious practices, constructions of new temples, etc. so as to domesticate and pull the Chinese into mainstream New Order Indonesia. Nonetheless, despite these assimilatory initiatives the ethnic Chinese were still marked out both in terms of education, that is, they could not join the majority of universities and could not get employment in the bureaucracy and military. Even the most assimilated ethnic Chinese was marked out, as all Chinese had a code in their passport that indicated they were of Chinese descent and thus not 'blue-blooded' *pribumi* Indonesians (for further details see Pan 1999: 157–60).

Things changed once again after President Suharto was toppled on 21 May 1998. The interim president Habibie and the following two presidents, Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Sukarnoputri, allowed the ethnic Chinese to practice their traditions, especially the Chinese New Year, learn Chinese languages, publicize newspapers and books in Chinese, and generally make Chinese culture more visible in the Indonesian society. The forced assimilation programme was thus formally abolished. This new *zeitgeist* was stipulated by a presidential degree issued in 1998 that instructed ministers and chiefs within the bureaucracy to scrap all discriminatory practices against the ethnic Chinese. And in May 1999 Chinese initiated political parties such as the Chinese-Indonesian Reform Party were formed and the renowned economist Kwik Kian Gie became deputy chairman of Megawati Sukarnoputri's Indonesian

Democratic Party of Struggle. Later on the same year he became Coordinating Minister for Economy, Finance and Industry in the Abdurrahman Wahid/Megawati Sukarnoputri administration. He was thus the first ethnic Chinese to attain a ministerial portfolio in the post-Suharto era. After sizing power in July 2001 Megawati Sukarnoputri's administration, represented by the Minister of Religious Affairs, issued Decree No. 13 stipulating that *Imlek* or the Chinese New Year was a public holiday. On the basis of these changes life for the Indonesian ethnic Chinese became somewhat easier.

These changes, however positive they may be, also posed new challenges for the Chinese communities. The remaining discrimination against them, especially in terms of obtaining Indonesian citizenship and having to state their ethnic belonging in their passport, still lingers on not forgetting the general anti-Chinese sentiment in the Indonesian society, carefully nurtured by the New Order regime throughout the 32 years it existed. What is more problematic, however, is a growing split within the ethnic Chinese community itself, a split that revolves around the question of identity. Although not an entirely new problem the question of how to designate themselves has really come to the forefront in the post-Suharto era. Labels such as Overseas Chinese, Ethnic Chinese, Chinese nationals or Nationals of Chinese Descent have been applied to the Chinese, not only in Indonesia, but throughout Southeast Asia, indicating a tense relationship amongst the ethnic Chinese, their respective nation states, and Mainland China thus turning an ethnic label into a problematic political signifier. For example, Leo Suryadinata (1997: 20) writes that for recent migrants their ethnic identity is stronger than their national identity. This is not a problem when China's relations with the individual Southeast Asian state are cordial. But when China–Southeast Asian relations turn sour then the ethnic Chinese generally become the focus of resentment from the indigenous people.

The international tendency to classify the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia as nationalized foreigners with a doubtful political loyalty towards the host community also poses tremendously problems for the ethnic Chinese themselves. If labeled Overseas Chinese then they are not thought of as true nationals in their host community, only sojourners with perceived strong ties to Mainland China, which might pose a political threat, and even if labelled Ethnic Chinese with many generations in their host community behind them as evidence of their adherence to their host turned new national community, then they are more or less social and political marginalized as can be seen in especially Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The dual nature of the ethnic Chinese identity thus represents a national security liability! As Tan Chee Beng (1997: 29) states in a response to Leo Suryadinata, 'Overall, the Chinese in Southeast Asia should not be called 'Overseas Chinese' as it is a label which is appropriate only for citizens of China living overseas.' He concludes:

> As proud citizens of our respective countries, we feel insulted to be called or even referred to as "Overseas Chinese". We are overseas in China but not when we are at home in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and so forth (Tan 1997: 25).

The main question here is whether the Southeast Asian states, especially Indonesia, will let the ethnic Chinese themselves decide what they prefer to be labeled. As we have seen in the case of Indonesia, at the bottom line it is national politics that decide what label to apply to the ethnic Chinese. Parallel to these external discourses internal fault-lines from within the Indonesian ethnic Chinese communities themselves are gradually surfacing. I am here referring to the distinction between *Peranakans* and *Totoks*.

Today the relationship between *Peranakans* and *Totoks* highlights the heterogeneity of the ethnic Chinese community. Anyway, they have never been a homogeneous group as also maintained by Suryadinata (1997), as the ethnic Chinese reflect different social and political circumstances in their respective host communities as well as different circumstances under which they became ethnic Chinese in a Southeast Asian context. The continued difference between *Peranakans* and *Totoks* thus represent a deep differentiation of the ethnic Chinese community. The first stands for assimilation into the Indonesian community. The latter are also trying to accommodate assimilation policies but with due respect towards Chinese culture and traditions and not the least towards the ancient 'homeland' China. Furthermore, current tensions between these two groups also link up to international relations even though they are played out in a local setting. For example, in the shadow of Mainland China's ascendance towards superpower status, at least in terms of economic performance, *Totoks* tries to re-sinicise the *Peranakans* so as to make them re-inculcate their ethnic and cultural background. This has the negative impact that the host communities become even more suspicious towards them: what are they up to, who do they represent, and are they really the loyal citizens they claim to be?

This split within the ethnic Chinese community is further enhanced by other fragmentary processes, this time within the religious realm. As mentioned earlier on the majority of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia is either practicing traditional Chinese beliefs or adhered to one of the many Christian denominations. This in itself is setting them apart from the general Indonesian population as that is about 85 per cent Muslim. Caught in between these two blocks we find the Chinese Muslims functioning almost like a buffer zone; not fully integrated in either of them, not fully liked by any of them. In the following final section I turn towards the plight of this vulnerably group within the ethnic Chinese community.

Religious conversion: On questions of faith or political economic expediency

As previously stated early Islam in Southeast Asia was gradually being replaced during the period between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries by a more orthodox form of religious practice. These developments lead to a radical decline in the number of Chinese who converted to Islam and a change in the relationship towards the non-Chinese community in general. The Siauw Giap (1993: 66) writes that:

> The transitory character of *Peranakan* society was becoming a thing of the past; its members were no longer amalgamated with indigenous society but had the tendency to remain a distinct and separate group – not wholly Chinese in character but definitively not Indonesian either.

Besides the successive attempts to re-sinify the *Peranakan* Chinese a more sublet development took place which reinforced the making of the Chinese as a distinct ethnic group. This was a gradual acknowledgement that the national population was also divided along class lines. The Chinese were generally classified as belonging to the middle class and above whereas the Indonesians mainly occupied the lower classes. The Siauw Giap refers to a study carried out in eastern Java, which revealed that no less that 83 per cent of the Chinese Muslims who participated in a survey of why they have become Muslims revealed that they had been ostracized by their family members because they had converted to Islam. The main reason was that many of their relatives thought that by converting to Islam they would become poor like the Javanese (The Siauw Giap 1993: 83). The Chinese Muslims were thus seen as endangering the societal position of other Chinese as well as offending the latter's sense of both ethnic and class identification.

Iem Brown (1989) writes that in the first half of the twentieth century, apart from long established families such as those of the above mentioned Yunus Yahja (born Lauw Chuan Tho), Tjan Tjoe Siem, and H. Abdul Karim Oey Tjeng Hien,[7] ethnic Chinese had few incentives for seeking assimilation with the Muslim community. Those who did were few in number and were mainly drawn from among the poorest sections of the Chinese community. It was not until Suharto's New Order regime became established after 1965 that there, according to Brown, were a significant number of conversions to Islam among the Chinese (Brown 1989: 114–5).

Why was this so? Writing on the reasons behind converting to Islam The Siauw Giap (1988: 336)wrote in 1988:

> A Chinese convert need not immediately lose his ethnic identity: as a prominent Muslim Chinese himself admits: 'I am a Moslem, an Indonesian, and of Chinese descent'. The Muslim community of Chinese descent, however, would ultimately become just a 'Muslim community', and not a 'separate Chinese community with a mosque'. Conversion to Islam has been seen as a last and final act or finishing touch of assimilation.

A negative effect of this process was, however, that by becoming Muslim, the ethnic Chinese were cutting themselves off from their family and the Chinese society, especially if they dropped their Chinese names and adopted Indonesians ones.

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[7] For details of H.Abdul Karim Oey Tjeng Hien, see Suryadinata (1993:105–13).

When taking a further critical look at these conversions it seems that they were heavily supported by organizations such as *Badan Komunikasi Penghayatan Kesatuan Bangsa* (Communication Body for the Appreciation of National Unity) and in particular by *Yayasan Ukhuwah Islamiyah* (The Association of Muslim Brotherhood), which aimed especially at converting other ethnic Chinese to Islam. This leads us to question how many converts are we actually talking about? How many are ‘a significant number’ in relation to the total number of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia? Here Indonesian statistics are of little use as they, according to my mind, do not distinguish between Christian and Muslim Chinese. It seems to me that the importance of these organizations are not in the actual number of converts they turned out, as that was and still is so small that it is almost undetectable, but rather in the political effect I hinted at in the introduction to this paper. The very existence of these organization was seen by the New Order regime as proof of the success of its assimilation policies and as such the success and legitimacy of the system itself.

As there are, again to my mind, practically no data on the contemporary relationship between Chinese Muslims and non-Muslim Chinese, and between Chinese Muslims and *pribumi* Muslims in Indonesia I will draw attention to some Malaysian studies which are carried out along these lines. For example, The Siauw Giap writes that 98 per cent of the Malaysian Chinese converts belonged to lower income groups, earning RM100 to RM450 per month. This income group includes carpenters, mechanics, drivers, hospital attendants, and other workers holding menial jobs, like labourers and rubber tappers, etc. Unemployed also formed part of these converts. Conversions among professionals with high incomes – doctors, engineers and the like – were comparatively few, with no more than 5 cases in any one state from 1967 to 1975 (The Siauw Giap 1993: 86).

He then goes on to mention that there are some short-term benefits from converting to Islam such as loans and scholarships normally reserved for Malays. He concludes that what is more important than these short-term benefits is that the converts are of the opinion that their conversion constituted a form of ‘security’ for the future, especially that of their children. He then lists a number of motivational incentives for converting to Islam:

- To marry with Muslims
- To obtain a job and a living
- To become Malaysian citizens
- To become friends with Malays after having been influenced by the qualities and teaching of Islam
- To be accepted as a Malay according to the official definition of a Malay, and to enjoy the rights reserved by the government for the Malays
- Attraction by the Muslim brotherhood and democracy in Islam

He cites Hin Fui Lim as saying that for about 30 per cent of the converts the main motivation for converting was the ‘righteous, co-operative, and democratic values within Islam. The rest, that is, 70 per cent converted because of more secular reasons (The Siauw Giap 1993: 86). This fits somehow into what was stated above in relation to Indonesia, namely that the ethnic Chinese in the first half of twentieth century had few incentives for assimilating into the Muslim *pribumi* community. Those who did were few in number and were mainly drawn from among the poorest sections of the community. That a certain portion of ethnic Chinese did convert to Islam during Suharto’s New Order was probably because of reasons similar to those outlined for the above Malaysian case, namely a wish to assimilate further into the Indonesian society. This assimilation process was probably more promoted and fostered by a nationalist ideology rather than governed by a desire from the populace at large to incorporate the ethnic Chinese into their midst. This is clearly illustrated in an interview that the *New York Times* (25 May 1998)had with a street venture a couple of days after the fall of Suharto in May 1998. He said:

> Our Blood will never mix with Chinese blood. Actually, we hate the Chinese, but we couldn’t do anything about them before, because they were protected by Suharto. But I don’t think they will be protected any more. We should send all the Chinese men back. The women can stay and marry Indonesians, and then the Chinese race here will disappear. And if they (the Chinese) convert to Islam, then they can stay because they will change. Because Chinese who convert do not act like Chinese. They are not arrogant and they do not swagger.

Taking the contradiction contained in this statement, the one between hate (expulsion) and assimilation, into account then one is inclined to think that the ‘hate (expulsion)’ aspect of the statement is the most felt one. It correspond quite well with what The Siauw Giap concludes in the case of Malaysia, namely that by and large the converts are viewed with contempt by members of their own groups as well as by the Malay community (The Siauw Giap 1993: 87–8). Tan Chee Beng adds that for the non-Muslim Chinese the adoption of Muslim names when converting to Islam is the same as throwing away Chinese descent and identify, which is why the non-Muslim Chinese frown upon their relatives or any Chinese for that matter who embrace Islam. The background for this rather harsh reaction is that Islam in Malaysia is closely linked to Malay ethnicity. He continues that the general rejection of Islam by Chinese Malaysians is not so much a rejection of the religion per se but rather a disapproval of discarding Chinese identity. He thus concludes on a more pragmatic note, namely that the Malaysian Chinese tend to view negatively those Chinese who embrace Islam as somebody who tries to win the favour of the Malays or trying to gain access to certain privileges enjoyed by Malays only (Tan 2000: 307–9).

These statements are in line with those mentioned earlier on by The Siauw Giap, that changing ones religion does not necessarily have anything to do with a hard felt need to embrace, for example, Islam as the answer to a quest for metaphysical solutions or supra-societal moral guiding principles to real life problems. It is also about societal positioning and political strategies. A negative consequence of these strategies is, however, that the converts become ‘ethnic marginals’ who are cast into an intermediate position between Malays and non-Malays.

This reminds me of a comment from an informant during a recent fieldwork in North Sulawesi in eastern Indonesia. He privately admits that even though Christian Chinese marry a Christian Minahasa woman the Minahasa per se (the name of his ethnic group) still regard the husband as a Chinese. He would never be regarded as a full-blooded Minahasa. The same seems to be the case among the Malays. According to The Siauw Giap, many Malay informants admitted privately that even when a Chinese embraces Islam and marries a Malay, they can never quite forget that he or she is deep down a Chinese (The Siauw Giap 1993: 89).

He cites a statements by William Skinner (1979) who argues that ‘while conversion is a barrier to assimilation it is not high enough to deter anyone who is determined to get to the other side’ and that ‘the strength of one’s desire to cross over is a function of the extent to which valued ends are attainable only on the Islamic side of the fence’ (The Siauw Giap 1988: 337). On the basis of the above discussion it seems that the fence still exists even though one has managed to climb it. The problem with this fence is that it is not within those who climb it but in the minds of those who are already on the other side!

The minorization process that began in the sixteenth century has thus developed a dynamic of its own. The ethnic borders between the Chinese and the surrounding society have over the centuries hardened thereby making it impossible to return to a pre-colonial past that was characterized by porous ethnic and religious boundaries. Furthermore, even though new social and political fault-lines are emerging within the Chinese communities they do not spill-over into the surrounding society but are played out within the confinements as defined by Chinese ethnicity thereby contributing towards a further differentiation of the ethnic Chinese community *per se*.

Even though some Chinese fractions do manage to break out of the confinement they are not capable of being assimilated into the surrounding society, as they are looked upon by the majority with suspicion. This is clearly illustrated when discussing the Chinese Muslims. They constitute such a splinter fraction that have managed to break out of the ethnic confinement but only to be caught in a no-mans-land between the ethnic Chinese and the rest so to speak. One could ask for how long such a precarious position is acceptable to the members of such a group? Their main problem is, however, where to go and what to do about it? Perhaps the ultimate solution to this problem is to join forces with the Chinese Muslims in other parts of Asia and beyond thus linking up to a transnational community of Chinese Muslims that might be able to function as a safety valve for those in Indonesia and Malaysia who can no longer stand the pressure of not belonging. Whether this is an option only time can tell.

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